FROM THE FIRE



EPISODE ONE
END OF DAYS

KENT DAVID KELLY

FROM

THE

FIRE

A NOVELLA

OF THE NUCLEAR HOLOCAUST

EPISODE I:

END OF DAYS

BY

KENT DAVID KELLY

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DESCRIPTION

On April 4th, 2014, 6 billion and 783 million people died in the blinding white fireballs of the Pan-Global Nuclear Holocaust. Sophie Saint-Germain, wife and scientist and mother of one, was not among them.

She lived for a time, and so her words endure.

The reclamation of her terrifying story is a miracle in itself. Uncovered during the Shoshone Geyser Basin archaeological excavations of 2316, Sophie's unearthed diary reveals the most secret confessions of the only known female survivor of the Holocaust in central Colorado. Her diary reveals the truths behind our legends of the High Shelter, the White Fire, the Great Dying, the Coming of the One, and the Gray Rain Exodus, her horrifying journey into the wasteland made with the sole conviction that her daughter, Lacie, was still alive.

For these are the first of words, chosen by the Woman of the Black Hawk: FROM THE FIRE / GIVE ME SHELTER / THAT I MIGHT ENDURE THE STORM, / GIVE ME THE STRENGTH / TO PRAY MY DAUGHTER WILL PREVAIL.

From the Plague Land, from the Fire. This is the book of the woman who was, this is the codex of our ancestors' revelation.

An episodic narrative, FROM THE FIRE, EPISODE I: END OF DAYS is the first installment of a serialized novel by Kent David Kelly. This unforgettable novella comprises 15,000 words, 60 printed pages, and is the lead in to FROM THE FIRE, EPISODE II: THE CAGE, also available now from Wonderland Imprints.

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TESTAMENT

(As originally published and serialized in the University of Tasmania, Australia [UTAS] Holocaust Studies Newsletter *for Q2, 3 and 4, 2317.)*

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THE FOLLOWING is the first section of a factual yet restructured narrative derived from the 21st-century confessional written by one Sophia St.-Germain, a female adult survivor of the 2014-15 Pan-Global Nuclear Holocaust. Saint-Germain lived near to the town of *Black Hawk*, an unrecoverable site believed to have been located some 60 kilometers southwest of Denver, somewhere along the eastward-facing "Rocky Mountain" spine of U.S. Province 38 (then known as "Colorado").

The narrative — in the form of a single spiral-bound cellulose notebook, reinforced and preserved between two square-shorn and modified automobile door plates — had been re-titled by later generations as a holy book, specifically as "THE BOOK OF WOMAN." The *original* title, derived from the first twenty-two words inscribed upon the title page in St.-Germain's own hand, is:

~

"FROM THE FIRE /

GIVE ME SHELTER /

THAT I MIGHT ENDURE THE STORM, /

GIVE ME THE STRENGTH /

TO PRAY MY DAUGHTER WILL PREVAIL."

~

This miraculously intact work was recovered from the fourth excavation of the Shoshone Geyser Basin hunter-shelter conclave, a site discovered in Yellowstone, U.S. Province 44 ("Wyoming") by UTAS Team CCCXIII/2316. This artifact was originally discovered at dig site 84, 3rd striation, depth 3.2 meters and had been ceremonially buried with seven female human skeletons and one feline skeleton of

indeterminate subtype.

The preservation and recreation of St.-Germain's tale represents a very exciting milestone in the field of Holocaust Studies, being only the forty-fifth survivor diary ever found intact, and to date the only one solely written by a woman. The document was written in both English and an obscure 21st-century language classified as "Teeline Shorthand," likely to maximize the limited amount of paper available. The current narrative has been slightly extended by this researcher to provide explanatory bridges between the partial entries made during Sophie's ordeal throughout April and May of 2014, chronicling her experiences on Zero Day and the twenty-six post-impact Cycles ("days") immediately thereafter.

This researcher is indebted to both Joseph Peter Carrington and Tatkret Begay of the Kodiak Trial Court Clan on Kodiak Island, Alaska, for their ceaseless efforts in translation, historical reconstruction and artifact preservation. I have written this narrative from Sophie's diary in an attempt to realistically portray her hopes, her fears, her love and — dare I say — her spirit. Despite a certain artificiality of voice, I have made every endeavor to simulate "suburban" and "upper class" life as it persisted in the 201X post-industrial era, but any errors pertaining to vehicles, products, branding, electronics or other cultural minutiae are certainly my own. Fellow researchers in possession of *any* conflicting first-source information are respectfully encouraged to correct me with the appropriate artifacts and/or period citations.

This is the book of a challenging woman, one who may well prove to be unlikeable at times. But she — among the millions — emerged from the Nuclear Holocaust; she became strong and selfless, and she certainly grew to become one of the eminent matriarchs of the Lost Age which emerged from the White Fire. The trauma-induced personality shift of St.-Germain herself, from cold and selfish daughter of wealth to noble-hearted Samaritan, has been portrayed herein as it is directly reflected in her diary's change of tone, from entry to entry over time.

This recreated tale of terror, hope and ultimate survival is intended for all, without restriction. May your Lore-Masters and -Mistresses find it pure. Please disseminate, share and retell this tale as one of the Reborn Truths as best you can, wherever your Clan may find you. And for my part, be it known that this work is dedicated with all my heart to Paul and our one surviving son, Gabriel. I love you both more than life. May you find these words of the Illumined Ones comforting as we approach our own darkest hour.

~

In Humility,

— Alexandria S.-G.C.,

Professor Emeritus of Holocaust Studies,

Tasmania, UTAS

iii.17-2319

I-2

ZERO DAY

(Four-Four-Fourteen)

SOPHIE GRITTED her teeth as the NPR daily Shelter Event Report segued into a BBC World Service recording. “Christine Collins reporting,” began the reel. *Very* British. Static hissed as the satellite signal bounced along the Rocky Mountains. Sophie clutched the Hummer’s steering wheel a little tighter.

“… for BBC World Service. As tensions escalate all along the Persian Gulf following the sinking of tanker *Burmah Endeavour* by discredited Iranian splinter forces, the Shelter Panic continues. More conflicting reports are coming in to us from Russia, and from sources quite beyond the Steel Line of the Volga. Entire cities, certainly including Volgograd and Orenburg, and — depending upon conflicting satellite imagery declassifications — perhaps even as far east as Tomsk and Novosibirsk, are being totally evacuated. We know that the Shelter Panic is becoming contagious, something of a social and Internet-contracted hysteria, as Russian citizens continue to secretly report via uploads to Youtube and social media from behind the Line.”

“Elsewhere in Europe, Vienna has been partially evacuated, Monaco is in chaos, and riots in Zurich continue for a third night tonight. Meanwhile, tragedy in Versailles as French police come to blows and then trade gunfire with self-termed survivalists digging alleged shelters for their families in the forest behind the Palace of Versailles, an event which has led Président de la République Giraud …”

Keep it out, thought Sophie. She massaged her forehead. *Keep it all out. I can’t take it anymore.*

She lifted a recycled-paper coffee cup out of the center console, took a sip of her cooling latte. The wipers of the Hummer H4 pulsed back and forth, purring and glimmering with sunset and the fitful springtime rain. Humming an off-key tune to herself to cloud away the BBC report, she slid her latte cup back into place, then pulled her iPhone 6GS out of its door-handle socket. The world news report droned on.

Can’t take it anymore. Don’t let me think*, don’t* feel*, don’t* —

Sighing, she texted to Jolynn down in Centennial, something

trivial about the sheet sale at Park Meadows Mall. *The more vapid the better. Be a bitch if it clouds it out, pretend you're* not *a social scientist.* Not *a mother.* Not *an NSA widow. Lacie is fine. Tom is fine. Don't* think*, don't* feel*, don't …*

She frowned as her cell phone auto-corrected 'Frette' linens to 'Friday.' It was only her glance up at the corrector bubble on the iPhone's crystal face that caused her to see that she was drifting her Hummer straight into the Escalade in front of her. In two seconds or less, she would cause a low-speed collision.

She slammed on the brakes. The H4 screeched to a halt once more. The pickup driver behind her shouted a singled redneck-inflected word — *"Lady!"* and she started to giggle before she could stop herself. The balding man behind her was furious. He chewed on a cigar, patted the outside of his door with a rain-slicked hand. What kind of a fool would keep his windows down during an April rainstorm?

Sorry, tough guy. What can I say?

Blushing at her own careless behavior, Sophie gave a little wave to her rearview mirror. Behind her, the pickup driver straightened his cap, flicked his cigar butt against the US Highway 119 sign, and gave her a little wave of his own. More of a fist pump, actually. She laughed again and the man behind her smiled despite himself.

Looking forward, she could see that a traffic jam had jumbled itself where Richman Street turned into the Ameristar casino. Nothing unusual, but she could hear people shouting. And someone *crying.* And hundreds more were — what? Was that *chanting*? She turned the radio down. The clamor of outraged protesters came to her through the window-glass.

~

"No more lies!

No more nukes!

Free Farhadi!

Tell us the truth!"

~

What in the Hell was going on?

Can't take *this anymore. Lacie is fine. She's with grandma. You just need to get this under control and she can come home.* Sophie turned her wedding ring with her thumb, tried to stop her hands from shaking. *She's fine.*

Looking back past the pickup and at the line of gamblers' cars slowing down behind her, Sophie clicked her turn signal on. But the cars in the lane to the left of her were already too close together to let her in. The driver alongside, Mrs. Claverdale no less, waved her an apology. Sophie mouthed, "No problem" and gave a shrug. The silvery-haired old woman snarled dramatically at the unseen protesters blocking the intersection up ahead, and Sophie laughed once more. Her voice had a nervous edge to it, an hysterical edge, like crystal. She didn't like it.

Taking a last long drink of her sugary coffee, she resigned herself to a tedious wait in the right-hand lane. *Always. Always, I'm too far from home,* she thought. *Too selfish. Too alone.*

The voice on the radio changed. She had successfully tuned out Christine Collins and the BBC, but now it was Jake Handler again on the microphone, a man she respected and knew personally. A good friend of Tom's. She turned the volume back up and was comforted by Jake's trademark polite annoyance at giving his air time to someone else. But he also sounded — what? Sophie's mouth tensed into a straight line of enforced calm. Jake Handler, a man who hunted wolves in his spare time with a bow and arrow and stayed out in the wilderness alone for weeks at a time, making sure he only killed starving animals that had no pups, was afraid. No, he was controlling it, but he was *terrified.*

His voice echoed in little spirals around the Hummer's interior as Sophie's right hand shook a little harder, turning the radio up too high. "Once again, *thank* you Christine," Jake was saying sarcastically back at the BBC tape, "but meanwhile here in the States, we have actual and new news about the real emergency developing since this afternoon in downtown NYC. Tensions in Manhattan and Jersey and far beyond today are continuing to soar out of control. At the, ah, in the intersection of Tudor City Place and, ah … East Forty-First, now this I repeat is in New York City right by the United Nations Headquarters … protesters broke down police barricades and, and they attempted to block Russian and Chinese delegates from entering the United Nations. A fistfight broke out, and someone fired shots. A

staffer to Ambassador Dmitri Altukhov, let's see, her name is — was — Vasilisa Mirskii. He's elderly, she was shielding him. She was, she was killed, okay? By the protesters, by the police? No one seems to know."

"So far in the police and Federal crackdown, continuing into this evening, we have reports of … what is this, *nine* American citizens confirmed dead, including two innocent bystanders and one policeman, names being withheld. What? Okay, okay. And we have, *what?* Christ. Ah, forgive. Forgive me, everyone. Please. We have reports of one hundred and eighty-seven injured. Solidarity protests are springing up in cities and towns across the nation at this hour, including in our very own beloved Black Hawk and Central City, they're calling it 'Occupy Intersections.' Can you believe that?"

"So. So, okay. I don't know. I don't know. *Please*, please keep the lines open because we're just three of us here and we're waiting for more. What? No. I'm not saying that. Look, I'm on, okay? People, please wait for this to pan out with Associated. Don't listen to the Internet. Stay in your homes. That's all I can, folks, this, I can't —"

Sophie killed the radio. A blinding light flashed across the sky.

She jumped up in her seat, almost cutting her shoulder where the seatbelt had twisted against her silk blouse's neckline, as lightning flashed and the rain began to worsen. The chants were getting louder. A strange sound clattered up and faded away inside the Hummer's interior, and she found herself looking over at the back seat and then down at the brake pedal, looking for the source of the curious sounds.

She swallowed, and the noises stopped. Her teeth had been chattering.

The Escalade pulled further up ahead, and Sophie could *see*.

Her mind struggled to process the revealed spectacle tangling itself along the street and sidewalks outside the Ameristar. Somehow a tanker and a delivery truck had gotten stuck in the intersection. There were at least five police cars all around them, lights flashing in wild reflecting arcs of red and blue. Officers shouted and waved, one policewoman pointed with her baton, a barely-restrained German Shepherd was barking at the crowd with foam pouring out of its jaws, and the two trucks which were stuck in the intersection slowly began to struggle their way through a mass of people, smoking their way up westbound 119. Thrown rocks and bricks bounced off the side of the

tanker. A beer bottle shattered against the trailer's flank. In the void left by the two trucks' passing, Sophie could see just what was causing traffic to snag in every lane in all four directions.

There must have been at least four hundred people milling angrily in the street, shouting. Chanting. Whoever Sophie thought of as protesters — dirty granola college kids, perhaps? — these people were not them. Some were gamblers and tourists, others were friends who Sophie knew well from her favorite restaurants and shops. There were people in wheelchairs, others standing all around them, black people and white with their arms looped through one another in human chains. Human walls, parted temporarily into two waves by no more than a dozen police and two frenziedly barking dogs. There were grandmothers, waving papers over their heads and ignoring the pelting rain. All shouting, screaming. There were *children* out there, and some of them were shouting too, some were even smiling up at their parents with the infectious energy, the power of it all. Some of the mothers were holding babies.

More lightning flashed, the wind was curling all around the Hummer in a sudden fit and shaking it, whirling eastward. Thunder rumbled along the canyons far behind.

The most defiant of the policemen, a thin older gentleman in a bulletproof vest, stood in front of another burly man who looked like an Isle of Capri bouncer or a bartender. The huge man's biceps rippled beneath a ridiculous Hawaiian work-shirt as he shook his gold-ringed fist in the officer's face. The old officer grimaced beneath a handlebar mustache, rain trailing down off the sheriff's cowboy hat that was tilted askew over his right eye.

Sophie gasped. It was old Peter Henniger, retired for years and with a bad back that would act up in a cold wind, let alone a driving April rain. What was he doing back in uniform?

Pete splayed his fingers out in front of the bartender's face, actually tapped the palms of his hands down on the huge man's arms and was saying his name over and over again like some dubious mantra of calm. Sophie could see Pete's mouth working, although he was silenced by the H4's closed windows and the screaming crowd: *"Henry. Now, Henry."*

Finally, the huge man backed down. He squinted and shielded his eyes, then turned to throw out an offhand curse at the delivery truck that was disappearing up the pass.

As Sophie watched, Pete turned to rejoin the beleaguered police line. He didn't quite make it.

A preteen girl, shivering in a Che Guevara T-shirt that was turning see-through in the rain, came up and intercepted him. The girl was absurdly tall, impossibly thin. Her damp and stringy hair shook off ringlets of water as she put both of her skinny hands on Pete's shoulder and spun him around. The pain on Pete's lined face flashed into anger as his back was twisted by the girl's unexpected grip.

Raindrops bounced off the girl's eyeglasses. Her teeth were bared, her braces showing, and Pete looked for all the world like he was about to belt her one.

Sophie's H4 began to drift forward again as her foot slipped off the brake. Her hands, as if moving of their own accord, slipped off the wheel and shook up into her hair.

Can't take *this. I can't.*

A strange feeling tingled beneath her scalp as her manicured fingernails dug into the skin.

"This isn't happening," she heard herself say to no one. "This isn't __"

One of the German Shepherd's barking turned into a frenzied barrage of yaps, then a yelp of pain. A gunshot rang out.

The crowd split away like a pool divided by a falling stone, ripples of screams and cries of disbelief churning their limbs into action. People were crawling over wet pavement, others scrambling past the gutters. A woman carrying a plastic shopping basket overfilled with oranges tripped, spun around and rebounded off the hood of a car.

The street cleared, the car the woman bounced off of sped through the intersection and away. Three other cars followed. The policemen and -woman, left in a cloud of exhaust, were forming a ring around Pete, their leather-coated silhouettes bristling with Smith & Wesson pistols and riot shields. One policeman still clutched a baton and pepper spray, but the young lady officer to Pete's right was pumping a shotgun.

Pete's voice bellowed out — *"Just cool it down!"* The crowd was mostly out of the intersection by then, fleeing the site of the gunshot, the growing and smearing pool of blood. It was a dog.

One of the German Shepherds, now with its jaw hanging and pouring forth a slush of blood and gore, was twisting in violent circles on the asphalt. Old Mrs. Claverdale's station wagon swerved around the dog as she hit the gas and flew up 119, her hands clutched on the wheel, her head hunkered down so that she could barely see over the dash.

Sophie let go of her hair. One of her hands covered her mouth, the other found its way back to the wheel. She edged forward as the Escalade inched up into the intersection. Pete waved it through, the driver gunned it and nearly hit a Hispanic woman who was struggling to keep her daughter from running out to the dying dog.

The man in the pickup truck yelled out to the Hispanic woman as he swerved around Sophie's Hummer and flew up the road. "Lady, get your kid the *fuck* out of here!"

The girl was pointing at the dog with a jolting finger, reaching out, sobbing.

Brakes squealed. Another car bumped up against the Escalade, then both pulled off into the Ameristar parking lot at Pete's furious insistence. He wheezed as he shouted. One man parted from the crowd and ran into the middle of the street. The policewoman with the shotgun was sighting down her barrel at an old man who was crouching by the dying German Shepherd. Her rain-slick hands shook as she braced the shotgun, ready to fire.

What the Hell, what the Hell …

Sophie had seen enough. She floored it.

Pete spun around to face the policewoman who was covering him, so he never saw Sophie that day, or any other thereafter. He slapped down the officer's shotgun barrel and was shaking her as the crowd began to close in once more.

* * * * *

By the time Sophie was up the mountain highway and a mile out of town, passing the tanker truck and weaving around the other panicked drivers who were hunkered down in their compacts and

sedans, she was pushing eighty, then ninety. Tires squealed dangerously as the H4 fought for traction in the splashing rain.

Her mind was buzzing, an insistent jingling of chimes and vibrating plastics.

No. Her phone was ringing.

She took a moment to ease off, to slow down to sixty and get in the right lane as she navigated the curve at the Pearsons' driveway turnoff. Ponderosa pines and aspens slowed from a blur and back into actual shapes along the cliff-side. Staring out at the snow-fog that was gathering and wreathing the heights of Gray's and Torrey Peaks off in the distance, striving to calm herself, she picked up the phone just as the call went dead.

The number on the display didn't mean anything to her. What kind of an area code was that? A *negative*, -003? There was no such thing.

Having passed all the slower drivers, she eased into a rhythm as the gray and emerald world slurred by her in rain-spun streaks. The wipers slapped and pushed away slush as the rain began to freeze against the windshield.

The phone rang again. Same area code, same mysterious number. Suddenly eager for a release, for someone real and tangible to get angry at and to let her vent and forget the chaos of fear and violence churning back in the intersection far behind her, Sophie flicked the iPhone to speaker and snapped out before the caller could even begin to speak.

"This is a private number. So what do you think you're selling?"

"Soph! Oh, *God.*" It was Tom. Her husband's voice so startled Sophie that she almost pulled off the road into a slick of icy puddles. She corrected her swerve, slowed some more and drove on.

"Tom?" She had never heard him sounding so distressed, so relieved. Not since his father had died. Had he been crying?

Tom's voice broke. He took a moment with a shaky inhalation, eerily loud and palpable in the Hummer's interior. Then: "Thank God you picked up."

"Tom? What's wrong?"

“No time. Sophie, listen to me.” He sobbed, it was unmistakable this time. A heavy breath, another. Tom had never called her while he was away for work with the NSA, *especially* when he was assigned to Petersen and NORAD. “Sophie, pull over.”

“I’m up the slope on 119. I can’t pull over yet, it’s raining.” She winced, unable to focus. So *what* if it was raining? If someone had died, if there was some kind of emergency, what did Tom care? “Are you calling from Petersen?”

Whenever Sophie was nervous, she chattered. She couldn’t seem to stop herself. “I almost didn’t pick up.” Her teeth tugged softly at her upper lip as she went silent, looking on ahead for a pull-off.

“God *damn* it, Soph. Pull the fuck off and listen to me.”

Sophie blinked away disbelief. Tom never swore, to anyone, and especially not to her. She pulled off just past the tiny Athanasiou Valley Airport, an unlikely jewel of windswept field and wildflower, poised within the cradle of its gray-misted meadow.

She stopped the Hummer, leaving the engine running. She turned up the heater, shivering, willing herself not to speak. But still, she could not stop talking. Tom was frightening her with his labored breathing, his hushed yet urgent voice.

“Tom, what is it? Is grandma okay? Did Lacie call you? What’s happening?”

“Don’t talk.” He was whispering now. Why? She raised the volume, and she could hear the click of rushing footsteps echoing around wherever Tom was standing. Where *was* he?

“Listen to me,” he went on, his voice hissing in a frantic swirl of shivery words as he tried to keep calm and get it all out at once, “listen-to-me-now-Soph they’re going to black, to black out all the comms really quick here, they think they already did them all but I, I got one flip channel three and they won’t notice it yet because they’re running around like chickens with their heads cut off, they …”

He was forced to take a breath. An hysterical breath, like a wounded diver gasping for air as he breached the ocean’s surface once again.

“Tom, what —”

"No! *Listen!*" His voice raised and cracked, some other man's voice could be heard in response. Then another voice, stern and unmistakable with the authority of command. Angry. Air Force people were looking for Tom, and Tom was *hiding?*

Sophie almost cried out as a wave of slush spattered up against her side windows. Someone went flying by on 119 in a Jeep, waving wildly at her out the window. What? An emergency? The Jeep honked and swerved a little, then sped up and went around the curve out of sight.

"Listen," Tom was saying. "I'm *inside*-inside." That didn't mean Petersen. Tom wasn't at the Air Force base. He was in NORAD, the North American Aerospace Defense Command. There were no simple phone lines into there. He was somewhere deep under Cheyenne Mountain, in the war bunkers where the vast computerized early warning system protected the entire nation's skies.

She found herself whispering in a faltering voice, "Tom, oh, no. No. Oh, no." But Tom did not stop talking.

"Don't ask questions, honey. Just do what I tell you. I got one last call into Mitch, okay? He's at the *place*. Our date. You remember it? He's going to help you."

Sophie's mind was racing. Tom *hated* his older brother. Mitch was something of a hippie with a heart of gold, an anti-military, anti-everything Renaissance man with a wiry beard, gaunt frame, an infectious laugh and far more goodwill than common sense. But somehow, Mitch had made a career for himself inside government, "subverting it from the core" as he liked to put it. He had even served for years with the Department of Energy cleanup of Rocky Flats, and the plutonium contamination there.

But he never did speak to Tom since their father had died, except through Sophie. Mitch and Tom were too different, too passionate, and too alike.

"— all right?"

"How, how can they, Tom this isn't —" Sophie began to chatter again. Her thoughts were flowing in violent channels of here and elsewhere, riptide and whirlpool, she had missed something important Tom was saying. "No, no Tom, I didn't —"

"Promise me!" He sounded desperate, tottering near some

precipice of mind.

“I — I promise.”

“Good. Mitch, Mitch picked up Lacie from grandma’s, he knows what’s going to happen. She’s safe.”

What?

“Tom, slow down. Mitch picked up our *daughter?* What *place* are they in?”

“Listen to me!”

“What’s happening?”

“She’s safe. Get to the shelter as fast as you can. Call Mitch on the way as soon as you lock and seal, do you understand me? He’s waiting for you to call. He’s going to help you, Sophie. He’s going to make … to make sure you get through this. For Lacie. For me.”

Get to the shelter.

Sophie had had nightmares about those very words. *Like a dream.*

Those words had been spoken in a variety of ridiculous and nonsensical settings which had all seemed tangible, credible and outright terrifying whenever she was asleep and adrift over the many wastelands of her imagining. *The worlds, the nightmares.* Spoken in one horror-world under a rising plague, the Ebola virus spiraling out of control and devouring humanity in its thoughtless and bloody coils, *Get to the shelter*. Spoken in an imaginary nation filled with endless tornadoes and spinning houses rising up in gargantuan airy columns like something from out of the Wizard of Oz, *Get to the shelter*. Spoken in a nation on the brink of war, riots, black of midnight, emergency klaxons howling, the nuclear missiles arcing their way through the crystalline night like fireflies …

Get to the shelter.

Sophie began to cry.

“Tom, tell me it isn’t true. Tell me. This isn’t happening.”

“Oh, Sophie. My love.”

“Please!”

“I’m so sorry.”

There was nothing she could say.

“You!” On the line, someone else was speaking over Tom and his ragged breathing. Someone else Sophie could hear, because they were shouting at her husband. “Put it down!”

The phone buzzed with an angry whine as Tom dropped the receiver at his end.

“Get on the floor!” the voice barked. Then a sound, a scuffle, a bang of someone’s knee or elbow hitting something metal, a fall. Something like a wastebasket spiraling across a concrete floor. Muffled curses, clicked-off safeties. And Tom’s voice again, this time deafening as he yelled into the phone inches away from his face.

“Sophie, I love you! Get in! Lock it down!”

And then a single gunshot, coiled echoes of angry metal, the squeal as the iPhone’s speaker overloaded into a cascade of feedback and bristling, wasp-like beats of churning static.

Echoes then, and nothing.

Sophie screamed, her hands clawing up against her throat, her head rebounding against the wheel and then against the driver’s window. *“Tom!”*

Labored breathing on the line. Someone else. Not Tom. A voice: *“Who is this?”*

“Oh my God, *Tom!”*

“Listen.” Whoever he was, the voice of Tom’s killer was like venom dripping down the line. But he was frightened, his breath and the electric air of his frantic hiss was pulsing with adrenaline from the kill. “Listen very carefully, Mrs. St.-Germain. You tell *anyone any* of what you heard, and we will execute you for treason. We will kill your daughter before your eyes. Right in fucking front of you. Do you understand me?”

Sophie jolted, shook her head from side to side. She flicked the phone off, ripped it out of its socket, threw it against the passenger window. It ricocheted down onto the air vent, its transparent case flying off in razor shards.

Get to the shelter, sang her mind. It was the only thing she could think, to keep from running out into the rain and shrieking at the sky.

Get to the shelter

get to the shelter

get to the shelter

get to get to get to —

She kicked the Hummer back into drive, swung a wild U-turn and raced back out onto 119, heading for Tom's mad private endeavor, his hidden and private survival shelter, far up the waterfall canyon of Fairburn Mountain.

I-3

FLIGHT

A CURIOUS serenity enveloped Sophie as the Hummer glided up the slick roads of Fairburn Mountain, past pine-sheltered mansions and trailheads and the scars of last decade's lightning fire. Cliff walls and racing shadows loomed over her as the sky broke into fitful mists of silver-blue, scattering the sleet into isolate bursts of drifting mist and rain. A covey of Blue Grouse fluttered past her just a few feet in the air, the white-flecked birds flitting out of the Hummer's way in a blur over the road.

Was it shock that instilled its strangling calm, its tranquility over her heart? Disbelief? No, she decided. *Unreality.*

That had to be it. None of this was real.

The words have been spoken, she was telling herself. *All alone now, until you can wake up. This is the End of Days. This is the nightmare.*

All she could do was drive, drive until her daughter Lacie kissed her awake and another perfect Sunday morning began as Tom snuck out with a wave and a grin, shifting his golf clubs onto his muscled back while he stretched and breathed in the frigid, sweet mountain air.

Get to the shelter, sang a girl's voice in her mind. But it was her own voice from another time, from when she had been innocent, and kind, and giving and un-betrayed, and never raped, never touched, selfless and mousy and loved by momma and tortured by the other girls at Academy.

The shelter. Get to. Get to.

Child-Sophie, no longer real, sang to the bitter woman who had become her. Trilling, a gentle insistence of allure, a girl-melody of urgent secrets.

Get to, get to.

* * * * *

At some point, she must have turned the radio back on. Jake Handler was no longer on the air, but some strange bluegrass and Appalachian jazz piece was lulling her into a surreal and droning flick of scene from scene, highway to forest to mansions back to canyon and rainy blur, all over and back again.

Somehow, in frigid vaults of Sophie's nightmare, all the mountain roads were aligned and almost real, just as they were supposed to be.

Sophie hummed to herself, another tuneless lullaby of the haunted and the broken. Her fingers trembled and flicked through some chilly, curious moisture upon the wheel.

On the radio a dire, piercing klaxon broke over the song, silencing the lilt of fiddles and twang of a mandolin.

It was the voice of a perfectly cultured young woman, something like the automated train announcer at Denver International Airport, or perhaps the submissive intonation of a Star Trek computer. Pleasant, dignified, absurdly calm, utterly without terror despite the urgent precision of the woman's words.

Sophie was forced to listen as the whistling klaxon buzzed its way into silence. Unreality began to melt away.

This was real.

~

"This is not a test.

This is an urgent bulletin from the Emergency Broadcast System.

Seek interior shelter immediately.

Do not remain outside; do not seek cover in or beneath any vehicle.

Take only the most vital essentials and shelter in place at once.

We repeat, this is not a test.

If you are currently situated in a building that is equipped with a fallout, earthquake or tornado shelter, go to the shelter immediately.

If you are driving, pull aside at once and seek shelter in the nearest

concrete building, with your face pressed down and your hands interlocked behind your head.

Do not shelter in doorways, or near windows.

Seek as much cover as possible, disregarding unauthorized access signage or restrictions of any kind.

If you can greatly improve your shelter by running for less than sixty seconds, do not panic or delay in evacuating your current location.

Should you have immediate access to water, food, battery-powered light sources or medical supplies, take as much as you can carry with all haste.

A thermonuclear launch has been confirmed by NORAD with an estimated impact time of twenty-five to twenty-eight minutes following the beginning of this message.

One minute and seventeen seconds have now elapsed since the beginning of this bulletin.

We repeat, this is not a test.

This is an urgent bulletin from the Emergency Broadcast System."

~

The klaxon on the radio once again, this time broken by three horrible droning buzzes more felt than heard, the harbinger sounds of a tornado approaching, or a flash flood thundering down the canyon.

Real. Tom is dead. Alone and oh, this is oh it can't be oh God, this is real.

An unfamiliar, incongruous smile spread across Sophie's face.

Lacie, Mitch, grandma, me. Pete, Jake, Mrs. Claverdale. Mrs. Claverdale's grandson, deaf and waving from the driveway. Home-baked cookies, lemonade. Signing, thank you. Thank you, Michael.

Someone was giggling, then crying. Sophie drew in a spasming gulp of air. The crying stopped.

We're all going to die.

As she drove the same emergency bulletin repeated, every beat

and lilt of the young woman's voice a pulse of calm and panic, each reiteration changing only in its time signature at the end.

~

"Three minutes and twelve seconds have now elapsed since the beginning of this bulletin."

~

"Four minutes and forty-eight seconds have now elapsed."

~

"Six minutes and twenty-four seconds …"

~

Time seemed to blur as Sophie guided the H4 up roads which were both familiar and unknown to her, misted and rain-spun tiers of isolate forest and asphalt which blurred together and away, away, seeming to coruscate along the radiant and uncoiling absence of her senses.

No touch no sight no sound, no, I, there is no one here, her mind sang. *I am no one. There is no one inside me any longer.*

Reality shunted aside the fleeting visions of curves and trees, and Sophie hit the brakes as she flew around a curve at too high a speed, wheels squealing and mud flicking up against the guardrail, and almost veered into a police car that was pulled up into a muddy turnaround.

How fast had she been driving? Where *was* she? She blinked as she passed the police car at thirty-five, looking back into her rearview to see if the officer was going to pull her over.

What she saw didn't make any sense at all. The officer was sitting in the *back* seat of his own car, staring at his shotgun over the front seat and running his fingers over his balding head. His shoulders were shaking. Was he sobbing?

The road curved to the right, a constant ascent now, forcing her to pay attention to its course. The police car faded into the mist and sleet curling far behind her.

What was happening to her?

~

“Nine minutes and twenty-six seconds have now elapsed since the beginning of this bulletin.”

~

It can’t, it can’t happen, no. I’m going mad. We’re all, we’re all going. Going to.

“Focus,” Sophie whispered. “Three. Three six nine twelve, fifteen eighteen twenty-one. My name, name, is Sophia Ingrid Saint-Germain. I am thirty-eight years old. I live in, I live … my … my Social Security Number is five three one —”

Another curve, a brief blossom of sunlight reflecting off the mountain road as two wind-parted clouds tossed away in separate directions and the sun poured down for some few beautiful seconds. Sophie slowed again. Some kind of Lexus, flying toward her in the opposite lane doing at least eighty, swerved on the road, corrected and whipped by her. Sophie caught a glimpse of a young woman with shell-shocked eyes and thin, silver-ringed hands clenching the steering wheel.

“My Social, my Social is five three one, six two, two …”

Her voice tapered out as the tears came again. She could not stop them this time.

War.

~

“Eleven minutes and two seconds …”

~

Surely the news was just about everywhere by now. She continued doing all that she could, the only thing. She kept driving, kept breathing, kept thinking as little as she dared to keep her comprehension of the world and its forthcoming annihilation to the merest sliver of awareness, motor skills and rote memory taking over, knowing that any moment she could collapse into full realization — *Nuclear war* — and curl away into a ball, helpless, useless, veering toward the cliff-side with only the guardrail to keep the Hummer from plunging down into —

She veered left and then right and corrected again. Was she in shock? Her hands and feet were performing, she knew the road by heart from all the times Tom had coaxed or even guilted her into making the drive with him to see his latest completed work on the cave and the survival shelter far below. He was always good-natured about it, and his skills were nothing short of incredible. And he was always so *proud* when she expressed genuine admiration for his vision and his gifts, the construction, the manuals, the radios, the water, everything; but she could never keep a confused and upturned lilt from the ends of her welcomed words, the words he so longed for. "Oh, Tom, it's just … *wow*. It's overwhelming. It's … wonderful?"

And he would always furrow his brow, that brief twinge of genuine hurt before his amiable grin could wash all of his secret thoughts away.

"I'm glad," he would say. "I'm glad you're starting to see, how important this is to me."

But whenever she ventured too near to the taboo subjects of their relationship — the National Security Agency, his work, the personal beliefs and sights and sounds which had made him so fervently spend millions of their dollars and thousands of hours on the shelter, always wasting so much for the *shelter* — his grin would fade and he'd take her by the elbow and offer to drive her back down Fairburn Mountain. Each trip into the cave and its secret shelter, each more revealing and compelling and fascinating in all he had accomplished, each journey up the mountain had ended in this way.

Always, he was hoping. Hurting. Hoping that I would understand, it was time. It was coming. Always. This *is always, this is Zero Day.*

She would joke with him about watching that survivalist show on the National Geographic Channel. It was toying with his mind, *most* men his age were just trying to pick up girls in their rebuilt Corvettes by the age of forty. He would chide her about her Starbucks addiction; she would gamely counter, pointing out that not *all* fly-fishing poles cost six hundred dollars, only the ones he was entranced by. Such taste! The jokes would always be the same on the way out of the cave and back to the car, but the sincerity, the affection behind their jibes were always resonant and pure.

She loved him. She did. And Lacie, once an idea feared by Tom and later by she herself, a lovely *child*, the two of them as one, had in their frail touching of faith become everything to her. Oh, she did love

her daughter, and Tom, forevermore.

~

"Twelve minutes and thirty-eight seconds …"

~

Very near to the shelter now.

Another curve, a fork in the road. *Keep right.* Asphalt still damaged and rippling with another winter's freeze and melt and waver, the earth rolling there beneath her wheels in slow and endless contortions, the winter-teethed road now all her own. Surely there would be almost no one on that road until the shelter, perhaps one more car and then never another.

Never another …

A few more rays of sun cast themselves in weightless and beautiful slices of gold upon the meadows far down the mountainside, another gust of wind and the rays of light were lost again.

Another. Never.

Sophie caught a glimpse of her own eyes in the windshield's reflection before the sunlight could fully fade, and the unexpected vision startled her with its plain and merciless flicker of her flawed beauty. It was always so strange to see herself unexpectedly, to begin to subconsciously criticize that stranger's features before the realization cast itself upon her reason in its awareness and its shame: *You are aging, you are looking at yourself. You are you.*

The woman there upon the glass was pale and thin, even bony in a way, with a bit of a sag to her neck and a deep crease at the right where she tucked her chin against her shoulder when she slept. Those nights, she would tilt her head away from Tom, her head facing the bedroom doorway, ready to hear baby Lacie's cries and to leap up from bed to feed baby before Tom could awaken to the little pleading screams. Even now, when Lacie was six and all the bed monsters were chased away into dustless corners of memory, Lacie still wanted mommy to get her a glass of water in the night, to comfort her when the thunder came.

Then Sophie's moment, *You are looking at yourself, you are you,* ended in recognition and the afterimage of her reflection imprinted

itself upon the road. Lightning coursed the sky. She gazed straight ahead as the road narrowed and the cliff-wall to one side grew higher on.

Drive faster.

She could not un-see the woman, entirely detached from what Sophie had once believed herself to be. She had seen a study in grief, a stricture of jaw, controlled panic, trembling lip, but surely that wasn't *her*. *That* woman looked cruel, uncaring. And Sophie, did she not love?

Was this some last desperate bid by her mind to hold onto its sanity? Who *was* she, after all? The answer to that question would never matter. She was Self, Sophie, Her Own Being, a prisoner in a stranger's body that was acting of its own will. Her body, it was making her drive faster. Very close now.

Get to the shelter

get to the shelter

get to

get

~

"Fourteen minutes and fourteen seconds …"

~

A left here. Slow down, don't stop. Keep traction. Take the left here.

Slower, by necessity. The Hummer jolted as she hit a pothole which certainly hadn't been there last fall, and the pines were now on both sides again and the setting sun lost far behind her. The road narrowed and the rains caused little rivulets to trickle down the boulders along her right.

She was supposed to be grieving for someone. Someone …

Did someone die? Who was it? What had happened?

A voice broken open and sighed, *"Tom."*

Was that anguished voice her own?

A sob wracked her shoulders and contracted her gut, a gasp as she inhaled and the body compelled the mind not to register anything more than the road itself, and rain. And time, zero, zero was coming soon.

Time.

* * * * *

The time for grief is later, said a new voice. A voice only in her mind.

Father?

Grieve later, Sophie. This is now. This is life.

~

"Fifteen minutes and fifty seconds …"

~

Sophie shook her head. She felt as if she was shaking free of a liquid veil, a cool gauze of serenity laced over the animal panic that was building in her heart, her lungs, her flesh and the shivering tips of the hairs upon her forearms. She trembled and swallowed, her eyes widening as she realized just how far up the Morrison-Kincaid trailhead road she had already gone. How long had she been driving without even registering what was going on?

This is no dream.

The last asphalt stretch of the park service road was far behind her. The ribbed dirt of the road beyond it had turned to slush. She hit a deep, muddy, ice-rimmed pool at thirty-five and the Hummer lurched as she fought to keep control. A huge splashing wave of mud sloshed up over the H4's hood. The wipers curved and bent under the strain, their micro-motors whirring and straining to clear away the sopping mess. Sophie was forced to slow down once again. A sick feeling tickled under her ribs as the H4 felt like it was drifting across water, the wheels floundering for purchase in the muddy wheel-ruts. The windshield began to clear, just in time for Sophie to see that she

was driving into another and deeper puddle that had formed a stream across the entire road. The wipers lost synch as they struggled to scoop away another gloppy torrent of melting snow and slime.

Cursing, Sophie shifted the H4 into four-wheel. *Should have done this ten minutes ago. Come on,* feel *you idiot,* think —

~

"Seventeen minutes and twenty-two seconds …"

~

Don't think, don't feel,

get to the shelter

get to the shelter —

The H4's engine lurched as it shunted control to all four wheels. Thick and silted water ran in runnels down the Hummer's sides as Sophie guided it up the left and downhill edge of the slanted road, where the flow of water had lessened for a time. The pine forest overhead gave way to even steeper walls of rock. The further she went, the walls loomed ever higher, until they offered only a meager shaft of snowy sky where the winds churned the gloom away into a rind of darkness.

Don't do it Sophie, father whispered. *Don't look at the sky. Don't look up at the sky now, hon. Keep going.*

"Daddy?" She shifted in her seat and bent over the wheel, her brow furrowed in concentration. "Why not, daddy?" she murmured. "Why *can't* I look at the sky?"

The voice did not answer her.

~

"Nineteen minutes and two seconds …"

"Warning! Impact is imminent and will occur in approximately five to nine minutes, dependent upon your location. Shelter in place. Move away from windows immediately."

~

Oh, God.

She drove as fast as she dared. The left wheel-rut snapped at her tires as she hugged the side of the narrowing road, trying to keep the H4 from lurching through the now-endless, cascading series of puddles on the right. The cliffs loomed higher still to either side. Chain-link drapings, massive metal nets staked up against the cliff walls, rose high above her and seemed to fade away into the sky. She knew these chain-sheaths were meant to control falling rock, to keep "small" boulders from tumbling down onto the road. But what would she do if there was a *huge* rock in the middle of the narrows, too big for her to lift with the H4's toolkit crowbar, with no room to either side for her to drive around?

Lacie? Lacie, will you wait for mommy?

What if I die here?

A boulder *could* be there. She knew it was perfectly possible on a mountain road like this, especially during a spring storm during the early melt, when the weather was unpredictable and the temperature ever-changing. Why, there was that one time up in Glacier National Park — had it been 2007? 2008? — when Lacie wasn't even born yet but they both *knew* that she was coming, when she and Tom had been driving up the Highway to the Sun, the most beautiful and terrifying Rocky Mountain road that Sophie had ever seen. Tom had been driving and *laughing* and she had been white-knuckled the entire way, holding her breath at one last hairpin turn near the summit when the sun flared around the mountainside and there up ahead was a monstrous beige RV of all things, stuck in the road over both lanes.

Some potbellied man and his wraith-like, shaky wife were standing out there in the left lane, staring at a massive craggy boulder which had a ring of little mountain-shards all around it. The road had become a crater, the boulder a squat emperor in the middle of the severed lane-line. And these two idiots from out of the RV were gaping at this thing like it was an *elephant*, so very entertaining, like a performing circus elephant sitting there for their pleasure, taking a shit in the middle of their road …

(Sophie giggled, the drive became frantic and delirious once more)

… and people in both directions were gaping and shunting forward in their car seats, and a line of cars was screeching to a halt very, very close behind the RV and Tom was still *laughing* of all things,

he could hardly breathe, and …

Don't think about that. Don't think at all. Turn here. Turn here.

~

"Twenty minutes and thirty-eight seconds …"

"Warning! Impact is imminent and will occur in approximately four to seven minutes, dependent upon your location. Shelter in place. Move away from windows immediately."

~

One more road even narrower than the last, a mining road blasted through the cliff with dynamite back in the eighteen hundreds when Colorado was little more than a territory of untamed peaks and windswept plains, with cavalry and settlers and Indian tribes all vying to prevail through their own untenable dreams, killing one another for gold, for hunting grounds, for shelter.

Shelter.

One more turn and *very* close now. The road was unmarked and shadowed, a gravel vein gouged into the cliff-side, little more than a tiered series of muddy waterfalls with borders of ragged thorn-brush. Icicles dripped, wings flitted and red-throated birds rose into flight.

She turned at the final intersection, little more than a mash-up of two bumpy paths, each wide enough for a single car.

The canyon, deeper. Cave. This way.

She blasted past the red-and-white striped snow-closure gate. Its bars were chained in the up position for spring, steel arms outspread as if in ironic welcome, a farewell for the ending of a blessedly mild winter. Two rusty steel barrels stood on either side of the road's next curve, one spray-painted "PRIVATE" and the other "KEEP OUT."

Tom had done that. How many years ago?

Another curve, deeper up into the canyon. She drove past the old-fashioned water pump, the flipped-over bucket Tom had sat on only the autumn before, making sure all was ready for winter freeze. Sunlit raindrops pattered off the length of the pump's icicled bar, light and water in restless turmoil, conflicting spirits of the seasons.

She was driving east up into the heart of Tom's land, her own land, *father's* land. The road-sand turned into slurries of melt-water and mud. Cliff walls, ever higher. There was very little snow up inside this canyon. The storm was gusting off to the east, but streams of water were trickling down the cliff faces, their flows skewed into oddly geometric zig-zags by the chain-link drapings staked into the stone. No more trees loomed along the road in front of her, only a few stubborn bushes high overhead, tilted out into the sky.

The sky … no. Don't look.

~

"Twenty-two minutes and fourteen seconds …"

"Warning! Impact is imminent and will occur in approximately three to six minutes, dependent upon your location. Shelter in place. Move away from windows immediately."

~

One more road sign, this one shiny and cobalt with its newness, stenciled by Tom just last year, stating in ominous block capitals:

"D EA D

EN D."

One last turn, and there it was.

The waterfall. The cave. The shelter.

Awareness, a fiery surge of immediacy, of the desperate compulsion for survival, filled Sophie's veins. Where was Lacie? She could not remember. By reflex, she rose in her seat and looked up into the rearview mirror but there was only the terrified and pallid aging woman there, quivering with terror and glaring back at her. Tears were streaming down the woman's cheeks.

Me.

Even as the Hummer neared the little waterfall, Sophie kept staring into that stranger's eyes. She could no longer look away.

Tom? Lacie? Lacie is … is she? Where is she?

~

“Warning! Impact is —”

~

Mid-sentence, the emergency bulletin on the radio went silent.

Outside, a horrible, enormous sound welled up over the mountains, covering endless miles in a moment with its deafening wail. Sophie could hear it perfectly through the windows. Her frantic and colliding thoughts, unable to place the sound or why it was so important, told her in unison that it was an Archangel unseen above the sky, and the Archangel was mourning. Screaming.

The siren.

Death. The Angel of Death. O, clarion.

The siren.

The emergency klaxon sounded, on and on. Far off behind the town of Black Rock, toward Rollinsville and up by the ranger’s tower, it sounded that keening signal which Sophie had always loathed, but had learned in time to ignore. The klaxon that always made Lacie cry, that startled her from napping. It was the one siren that was always tested on the first Wednesday of every month, meant to presage tornadoes and forest fires, simple and tiny disasters from a yesterday-world that soon would be burned to ashes.

The cry of the siren, it raged in Sophie. It spoke to the most primal part of her.

Flee. Flee.

There would be no more tornado warnings, no more warnings for wildfire. This was the final cry of war, *This is war, this is really happening*, and the missiles were coming down.

Halfway around the world and they’re almost here.

We’re going to die, Tom is dead, we’re all going to die.

Oh, Lacie. Oh, Lacie I’m sorry I ever gave birth to you.

I never meant for this to happen to you.

This isn’t the ending I once promised you, my little princess girl, no dreams, oh I love you.

I'm sorry for the world, for bringing you here, oh I am so sorry.

Never did I believe they would ...

they would actually

never

never never

Time had become so tangible, so weighty and slow. The emergency bulletin was on again.

~

"Twenty-three minutes and fifty seconds …"

"Warning! Impact is imminent …"

~

I'm not going to make it.

Sophie heard herself give a choking cry. She was going to be sick, her stomach was twisting in upon itself, the coffee was gurgling, welling up and burning her esophagus. Her cheeks puffed out with a moan of nausea.

Can't stop

can't stop

She hit the gas. Looking down the road, it was right there. The waterfall was real, the shelter, it was actually there.

I'm not going to.

Driving as fast as she dared, she aimed the H4 directly toward the waterfall that marked the road's dead end. The Hummer swerved of its own accord as its right front wheel caught a rainwater-tumbled rock on the edge of the wheel rut, then came down with a slippery thud and locked itself into the rut again. The Hummer veered toward the right-side canyon wall. Sophie yelped as the passenger-side mirror collided with the rocky face, shattered, and snapped one of its metal supports in two. The mirror there dangled and bumped against the passenger door, as Sophie steadied the H4 away from the wall.

Faster.

Thirty yards away from the waterfall, twenty.

The waterfall was little more than a few stringy gouts of white water cascading down, but they sprayed up enough of a mist to obscure the cave behind to just about anyone, and Tom's cleverly-painted canvas hid the cave entirely. The only thing strange about the scene, a counterpoint to the icy and guideless waters and misted stone, was the little radio antenna tower propped up on weathered girders far above.

~

"Twenty-five minutes and twenty-six seconds …"

"Warning! Impact is imminent …"

~

The deepening mud caused the H4 to lurch into an engine-throttling crawl. Fifteen yards until the H4 would run its way under the waterfall. Twelve.

No time.

No time

no time no time —

There was a crackle on the radio, and Sophie took her foot off the gas involuntarily as the emergency bulletin was overtaken by a frantic babble, words coming out in a broken torrent and constricted into a single voice that couldn't breathe the words out fast enough. She *knew* that voice.

Jake Handler was yelling, *"War! War! Pike's Peak! I can see the contrail! The warhead is splitting up! Oh, Jesus! Save us! Cover your eyes! Get the fuck away from the windows! Get —"*

The H4 lurched to a stop just before the waterfall, in the shallow pool before the cave. Sophie could not control her stomach anymore. Her cheeks puffed out again, her breath rushed out of her nostrils, and she vomited coffee and eggs and the undigested remnant of last night's dinner over the wheel, over her hands, over the dash and into her lap. She could taste coffee and cream, hot stomach acid and the

horrible taste of bile. Of terror. She vomited again, but nothing came out the second time.

Shaking her head, tapping the gas and clutching the dripping wheel with shivering fingers, she edged the H4 under the sheets of icy and pelting water, through the parting seam in the camouflaged tarp, and into the blackness of the cave. She flicked on the headlights, and in that moment the entire world behind her turned shock-white beneath a photonegative sky of tiered and burning clouds.

* * * * *

Airburst.

It's coming it's coming —

What if she had not been in the canyon? The cave?

That thought lingered, resonating upon the hovering and fragility-infected length of one, shell-shocked moment that went on and on forever, a moment of blinding light and nothing else, soundless and impossible.

The white light pierced through the waterfall, the darkness, it turned her rear-facing mirrors into squares of snow-blind purity, sunburst utter white and utter glory. The radio died in a huge burst of static. The wailing klaxon was silenced upon the mountain.

Some voice of reason deep inside her, *Tom is that you? Are you here? Are you alive?*, was whispering to her in its silence, *Think, Sophie. Not impact yet, it's airburst. Airburst. Knocking out communications, the —*

The blinding light turned scarlet. The one moment fractured.

A wave of heat swelled through the waterfall, spinning its arcs of water into gouts of ice and steam. The H4's tinted windows flared and turned to deepest black. Sophie hit the brakes to avoid hitting the end wall of the cave. She went blind. She took in a breath to scream, but the shock of it all was stolen from her as an immense thunderclap shook the cave walls, made the mountain groan and set the H4's windows juddering and quaking in their frames. Somehow the driver's

door lock sprang up and a little dying alarm went off, two chirps then done and gone.

The sonic boom of the airburst nuclear strikes — over Denver and NORAD and the Air Force Academy and Colorado Springs — turned into a long, cascading tide of overlapping waves of roar and thunder.

It's happening. It's really happening.

Seconds had passed, eternity.

At ten miles an hour, with tinted windows blinded off and doused in the savage light of the aerial nuclear explosion, the H4 crunched into the far wall of the cave. One of the airbags, the *passenger* airbag of all things, went off with a bang and puffed away half of Sophie's interior space.

She coughed, a gargling sound. She swallowed stomach acid.

The windows began to de-tint themselves. One of the four headlights was broken, the other three were casting a garish light directly against the cave wall. Back behind her, outside, the airburst fireball flickered the mirrors once more, and the windows all went dark again. Thousands more nuclear warheads were soon to fall. The *real* strike, the ground strike, would come down now in mere minutes, with no defense systems or aircraft operational to stop them.

Everyone in Black Hawk would burn. The world.

As if disembodied, thinking but unable to act, trembling there with vomit dripping down her silk blouse and down her ankles, Sophie wondered: if millions of people were to scream at once, all crouched down in their basements and their office building shelters, would she be able to hear it there, miles away?

Soon.

Soon, soon, soon.

No time

no time no time

Sophie struck herself, her unfeeling thigh, her face. She shook the steering wheel in a frenzy, grunting and sobbing, as if doing so would wake her from the nightmare. A thought was racing like fire inside of

her, if she could only concentrate for a moment, hear it, *think* instead of just feeling this terrible immediacy of panic —

Get inside

get inside the shelter

get get in

nnnnnnnnn

She opened the driver's door, clicked out of the seatbelt and tumbled down onto the frigid and muddy cave floor. Somehow she had turned off the lights and the ignition — but when? — and the keys were clutched in her right hand, the hand that was shaking madly and angled like some strange piece of ivory that was no longer a part of her. Light, an accursed and incredibly hot sheet of crimson light, was shivering through the waterfall from outside and turning the cave into a horrid striped tangle of light and blindness.

She gagged on the exhaust trapped in the cave. She was still on the ground. Everything was sideways, and cold mud was getting into her mouth and filling up her hair.

She crawled up on all fours, looked around frantically for the shelter's entrance, and she could see the pale green glo-lites along the cave floor, their feeble and ceaseless radiance made sickly by the burning fires of the roiling sky outside.

Shelter!

She was soaked, freezing, burning, sweating, covered in filth and vomit and tangled up in the door-torn remnant of her skirt. Kicking off one of her shoes (the other refused to release), she crawled for the hidden hollow that led in deep to the shelter's ladder, guided only by the glo-lites themselves. The scarlet light and unearthly heat burned away behind her.

There were air shafts piped over her head, vents and grills and tubes, and a huge artificial square in the left cave wall, half-covered by a muddy blue plastic tarp. Yanking the tarp, popping its fringe out of shower-curtain loops, Sophie saw the crude narrow gash in the rock which led down into the shelter far below.

She was nearly in darkness then, and another wave of thunder rose and tumbled down through the canyon far behind her. Was that the

wave of another nuclear detonation in the atmosphere, another airburst, just now reaching her from dozens or hundreds of miles away? Which city had just been blacked out and presaged for destruction? Laramie? Boulder? What if this was being repeated over every city in the nation, every military base, every city in the world?

Where were Mitch and Lacie?

Tom?

She kicked the cold metal activator plate near the floor, encircled with its own emerald ring of glo-lites. Her pupils shrank and her eyes filled with stinging tears as the fluorescent grid lights along the left wall pulsed on, the ones most needing replacement flickering crazily before burning with a false, un-warming light. She edged deeper into the hollow. The claustrophobic shaft was just three feet in front of her, its dripping and icy aluminum ladder leading down into the dark. The oval lights inset between the ladder's rungs flicked on one at a time, down and down, and somewhere deep behind walls of stone a generator was humming on.

Did it always run? Had she just activated it?

Sophie crawled to the ladder, nearly slipped head-first into the shaft. It was far, far deeper than she remembered. She righted herself, slipped with her bare foot onto a low rung and caught herself with her other foot kicking and curling, *Get down, down,* she looped her elbows into the ladder, coughed vomit, began to climb down into the shelter's entryway.

She fell off the ladder near the bottom, dropped eighteen inches and tilted into the shaft wall.

Seconds later, shivering so hard that she could barely control her arms and legs, Sophie hunched down upon the landing in front of the steel-plated vault door. Her toes curled around the drainage grill that was gurgling with frigid water at her feet.

She spun the door's auto-locking wheel, her hands slipping off the condensation droplets, beads of water stuck between the grooves of the wheel's inner rubber ring. She was still clutching the car keys, the house key was gouging into one of her fingers as she forced the wheel but she would not let the key ring go. Not for anything. She tensed, the house key stabbed her and a little blood welled out of her index finger. She gasped. The wheel squealed, spun, stuttered and then jammed.

No!

She pushed harder in the opposite direction, then counter-clockwise again. The wheel jammed in the same position with an angry screeching of hidden gears.

Sophie screamed, throwing all of her weight into the wheel. *Come on!* Harder.

Something gave way, little ice chips sprinkled down into the grating. She stumbled off her feet into the wall again as a hydraulic whine took over and the wheel spun itself counter-clockwise with a hiss and a purr, rolling the vault door inward on unseen hinges. Mist sheeted up as the warmer, stale air inside the shelter puffed out.

Sophie ran into the tiny entry. The narrow inside there smelled sterile, a mixture of rubber and cleaning solution and dead air. *Clang.* The door thudded and clanked shut behind her, seals pressurized. Something electronic beeped twice and gave a stuttering whirr, then clicked back into place. Sophie barely registered a frantic thought — *How do I get back out?* — and the wheel spun itself back in the other direction.

Echoing tremors of metal on metal. Silence.

As Sophie's eardrums popped and she worked her jaw, new noises swirled up in every direction. The noise was sudden and jarring, un-muffled generators humming, fuses flitting *click-click* as light banks began to spark, plastic streamers somewhere fluttering where a vent was spilling out new air, and something metal like a wrench or a screwdriver was clattering up on one of the utility shelves. Whatever it was, it fell off a vibrating surface and clanged onto the concrete floor in the farther room.

Warmth began to puff in tangible currents around the shelter. There was the whisper of whirring air, a bitter taste of dust, the shunting of power and twinkling of lights in aluminum cages as Sophie's *entering* spun a hundred things into motion.

Air, light, oh thank God …

Sophie hugged herself, bent over as the first cramp of nausea crawled through her belly and down into her legs.

* * * * *

I remember now.

Some.

There's beds, beds for three, three of us … ?

No. I. Me.

And how long?

How long will I be alone here?

She fought to regain herself, to understand. Something was still happening. The floor rumbled.

Stone dust peppered down from between the plates in the low and claustrophobic ceiling just above her head. She heard her father's voice again, *"Hon, don't you dare look at the sky!"* so loudly that she covered her ears.

Breathing in furtive gasps of barely-controlled panic, Sophie followed the narrow entry tunnel. It edged off to the left, its angle engineered by Tom so that the vault door could be defended if need be. There were submachine guns in here, somewhere. Hunting rifles. Assault rifles and machine pistols. Despite Tom's repeated urgings, she had refused to ever learn just how to fire them.

She passed through the second angle of the passage, a lead-sheeted narrow which Tom had called the radiation trap, and came to the shelter's true entry at last. She pushed through a doubled veil of hanging strips of lead, plated tiles locked away in a thick plastic curtain. Beyond the lead curtain was hung a second tapestry of translucent vinyl strips, and the welcoming ice-blue light of sanctuary glowed out from behind it.

There was a deep niche in the concrete wall, with another strip covering its hollow. Sophie peered into the niche and saw a red aluminum flashlight, socketed in its charger. Despite the ceiling lights and the assurance of the shelter's many automated systems, Sophie reached in, grabbed the chilly flashlight, and flicked it on. She leashed its plastic ribbon onto her wrist, just as Tom had taught her.

Because what if the lights go out?

Something made her think, *"Grid priorities,"* but she could not remember what that might mean. She knew only that she was hyperventilating, freezing despite the warm gushes of air, and close to shock. The terror-drone in her mind was filtering the mantra *Get to the shelter, get to the shelter* into *Don't get caught in the dark*, and that was all.

Don't. Calm. You need to think, Sophie.

Time refused to accelerate. She seemed to drift, to release herself into a thin fleshly resonance of activity and response.

Think!

She did not know how many of the shelter's systems were automatic, or what more she would need to do to survive. She only knew that all of Tom's emergency manuals were stacked in the binders on the utility shelves by the work table, where they could be quickly accessed if the light had failed to come on. Those racks of shelves loomed over her, bolted into the interior-facing wall.

One of the ceiling lights just above the left-hand bank of shelves refused to stop flickering. It strobed fluorescent washes of ice-light down over Sophie's glistening face. She stared at it, then gasped as a keening squeal announced that the vault door behind her had finished pressurizing.

What if I never get out of here?

She looked up at the walls of the cluttered entryway, up at the aluminum shelving filled with more binders and CD-R spools, over the fuel barrels all stacked beneath their oily tarps. Shivering, hugging herself and biting her lower lip to keep from crying out, Sophie edged her way beyond the claustrophobic entry and deeper into the shelter proper.

She had not seen the "Great Room" since her last tour with Tom, two years ago. She could see where the thousands of labored hours had gone, hours she had complained about more times than she cared to remember. Over the years Tom's weekend hobby had quickly become an obsession. Whenever he came back home from working in Virginia or in NORAD, he had been here. When he came back to "the mountain" he always invited her to come along, and nine times out of ten she had refused to join him. Now, regarding all of his

accomplishments and standing there in a haunted *nothingness* of sanctuary, Sophie could hardly recognize the shelter she had once endured and secretly despised.

The Great Room was fifteen feet wide and thirty feet long, an "underground mansion" according to Tom. The reinforced ceiling with its interlaced girders was new to her. She cringed, fighting the urge to cower beneath the rectangular grids of light. The girdered reinforcement, with all of the plastic water cylinders and canvas bundles stacked up there in netted rows against the roof, made the Great Room's ceiling seem even lower than before. The room stood filled up on every side with plastic-covered stacks of supplies lined up in labeled and fluorescent containers: generator fuel, meds, glo-sticks, flares, matches, recycled paper.

And what was that strange contraption, an iron spider-like thing standing inside a square concrete tub that looked like some kind of shower-stall? Some kind of advanced water pump? What was the purpose of the two-by-two square of aluminum sinks set into the concrete floor?

Time was speeding up again. She had a sense that precious seconds were ticking away.

Away to what?

But her shivering selflessness would only let her think: *Don't make me stay, stay so long in here, that I understand everything before the end.* Sophie balled her fists together in an effort to stop her fingers from shaking. *Don't make me.*

She could hear the main generator humming away in one of the back rooms. Two ceiling fans were whirring, casting geometric shadows across the metal shelves. The translucent plastic seal over the doorway into the next room beckoned her further on, but there was a disturbing alien cast to the light that was glowing from inside that pressurized chamber, as if its seal were some kind of spider-web or the mouth of a Venus flytrap, its interlocking plastic fingers beckoning her to come inside.

Forever.

Alone. I could be alone here, forever.

Why haven't the missiles fallen?

Why has every moment come to rest? How much time has passed?

She had no idea. The seconds were become tenuous once more, breaths were becoming hours.

She struggled to remember what Tom had told her on the phone, before, *before*. His brother Mitch was with Lacie, he had said, in the *place*. *The place?* Surely, Tom had spoken in code because he knew that if he had given an address or some other identifier, the Air Force security personnel would have killed him for the breach. And what would they have done to Lacie, if there was time?

"Oh, Tom."

None of that mattered now.

The place. The date? She needed to remember what that could be.

Call Mitch.

And how was she supposed to do that?

She pressed her fists against either side of her head, and her hands spread open across her cheeks. To silence her thoughts, to focus, she spoke into the silence. She meant to say something slight, calming, but what she heard was this:

"Do I want to live?"

And inside her, *No. Oh, Tom. Oh, no.*

Don't make me.

"Lacie," she whispered, already afraid to hear her own voice reverberating within this sterile tomb.

Lacie is alive and she's with Mitch. I need, I need to find her. She's out there somewhere, somewhere safe. Think of Lacie. Live for Lacie.

The last words she spoke before the missiles came down were these: "Tom, I'm so scared."

But there was no reason to speak at all. There was no one to answer her, and perhaps there never would be.

I-4

IMPACT

WITHOUT THE radio, the daylight, the snow, the pulses of fleeting cloud and falling water, Sophie had lost all familiarity with time. She had entered the shelter and beheld the Great Room. One or perhaps even two hundred seconds had passed in an all-consuming drowning wave, a series of frantic impressions that felt like years.

She remembered Tom grimly saying — once and never again — that there would be no clocks within the shelter, that installing one would lead to "dark thoughts" which he refused to give any life to.

Sophie began to understand that perhaps two minutes had passed since she had entered the shelter, but it could have been two hours, two years, two lifetimes.

~

(The narrative is fractured here, for Sophie herself was not certain what she remembered.

And the truth is this: as Mrs. St.-Germain spoke her last recorded words upon Zero Day, three Russian R-36 Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles, each with a payload of ten warheads and thirty penetration drones, impacted in intersecting clusters, a triad of interlocking rings of death and fire, raining down over the entire Denver Metro area. In forty-three seconds perhaps as many as three million people died, the skin peeling away in shock-blasts and burning to vapor in the air, their eyes melting down their cheeks, their teeth turning to black and powdered glass.

The Rocky Mountains were a wall, a granite bastion separating American humanity into two fated tribes for the wrath of Holocaust: those to the east, of the plains, who burned and died quickly; and those to the west, of the spires, who died slowly and far more horribly. This we know of the region of Black Hawk, and little else. From other testaments I have reconstructed all I can; the diary of St.-Germain shall tell us a little more.

~ S.-G.C.)

~

Impact.

However long Sophie had stood within the shelter, that eternity ended as she spoke the words *"So scared."* In that moment, she felt a shock like an invisible thunderbolt all over her body. Her flesh rippled with the impact, her hair whirled up in coils, her tongue peeked out as her cheeks were pushed by the shockwave into a wild rictus of a grin. Then the world entire was flung sideways.

An incredible roar, the loudest sound she had ever heard, ripped through the mountain and forced its way through widening cracks into the girder-interlaced granite above her head. She could feel her eardrums pop with a blood-inflected *squish* deep within both sides of her skull. All sound was obliterated while the world shuddered and jolted to the right, replacing her sense of hearing with an eerie, incessant whine of rerouted blood, blood surging in a wild torrent through her veins.

Thrown off her feet, slammed back with arms outstretched and a twisted spine and flung away to one side, Sophie was blown back into the Great Room's work table to her right. She rebounded and then was crushed forward into a bank of utility shelves. The flashlight strap snapped and the flashlight flew off her wrist. The aluminum rack crashed over, shelves tilted, and dozens of printout-choked binders flurried out like wounded birds and buried her in a torrent of vinyl and paper. Compact Disc spools tumbled up and cascaded in silver-trailing spirals all around her.

She was crushed, buried.

Blackness and then frantic stripes of fluorescent light flowed over her; she could see the world still shaking out there beyond the shelves, hot shelves which somehow had been piled up on top of her.

The world, still shaking and recoiling unheard, powdering down black dusts and gouts of shrapnel from the mountain's scorched and twisted heart, faded into a scarlet darkness far away.

Sophie thought, *O clarion.*

And then there was nothing more.

I-5

RISING

WITH A surge of adrenaline and agony, Sophie drew in a frenetic breath. It was like screaming inward, inhaling her own shouts before she could lend them voice. Her lungs filled with concrete dust as she wheezed, coughed, and felt her fingertips spark with trapped blood and pinched-off circulation.

She had no idea what happened next, or how. She just roared and stood up, like a weightlifter heaving a weight that was surely impossible for a mere mortal to ever move.

Muscles tore in her shoulders, her thighs.

Her roar kept building, a breath that depleted every fire within her veins and heart and turned her sight to isolate pinpoints of tilted light. The weight above her moved, and she moved with it.

She merely squatted and stood and the aluminum rack of shelves crashed off of her. Spilled and cracked-opened binders tumbled away from her back and legs. There was a pool of draining urine beneath her, sweat and saliva, but only a little blood. She stood straighter, stumbled, and clutched the tilted work table with one hand.

How did I do that?

Her insides felt like they were crumpling, husks of dehydrated muscle shivering in their hollows along the bone. Her right hip socket cracked back into place as the air in the ball joint squirted out over the cartilage, but she did not hear the *pop*. She only felt the thrill of pain.

There was only that whining, keening surge of circulating blood within her ears, the silence of the deafened. She cried out, another cascade of soundlessness, but a breath was demanded of her. She took it, her head reeling with the half-seen spectacle of blood-red tracers and fleeting stars. Agony filled her limbs as the blood surged back through her and her heart raced out of control. Electric jolts thrummed up her calves, under her ribs and into her shoulders. Her silk blouse was torn open, buttons popped, her skirt was in shreds and she was drenched in body fluids.

Alive.

Eyes bulging in disbelief, Sophie looked back over her shoulder at the nine-foot-tall aluminum cage of shelves, laying angled and broken on its side.

I moved that. Then, detached, almost clinically: *I shouldn't be able to do that.*

The whining in her ears was pulsing now, ringing. She touched her fingers in to either side, there were blood-drops in her ears. Soon there rose a sound of something else, then ringing again, like an oceanic tide of waves made of chimes and wind. Slowly she realized that the sound between the whining arcs was her own breathing.

I can hear again. A little.

Standing straight, reeling, Sophie took a deeper breath, and —

* * * * *

Vertigo.

Her arms slowly lifted up into the air, like it was sleepover again and she was playing the "light as a feather" game with Jolynn and Margie and Sara, *light as a feather, stiff as a board, catch me, catch me* —

What am I thinking? She wondered. And then, worse: *Who am I?*

She fell to her knees. She convulsed. Her bowels released, she could smell herself.

Can't breathe.

She lay there, gasping. The floor was thrumming still, somehow, with the massive explosions outside. *More? How can there be more?*

How long … how long was I …

Her head throbbed, eyes pulsing through light and dark as she looked around. She retched as the stench of her defecation crept up through her sweaty clothing. The Great Room of the shelter was

intact, but *hot.* Sweltering. She could feel the heat surging through the cracked concrete beneath her body, warming the entire room.

Two of the walls had cracked, framed maps and a bulletin board had fallen out of their bolted sockets onto the work table and the floor. Off in the back rooms, some kind of air conditioner was filling the air with vapor and chemical-tinged moisture, straining and keening into life. Dust was still filtering down, it was pooling on the floor, into the puddle of blood and filth she had left beneath her. Her urine was trickling down a drain.

She tried to say, *"Thank God. I'm alive."* But she could not say anything. Her vision faded away.

Lacie. I'm coming.

* * * * *

A light, then. A tunnel. Lacie was there. She was holding her hand back out to mommy, she was running. She was running away.

Lacie my love,

honey no,

stop running.

Stop running away,

for mommy.

Please?

Please wait for me.

Sophie started to run, to run after Lacie, out of her body. Lacie looked back at her, a tragic and poetic smile upon her cherubic face. Golden hair, Tom's wispy fleece of gold, spread in a wind-spun halo about her face. Somehow, Sophie's daughter seemed ancient, unfathomably wise. A light around her blossomed brighter.

No! Stay with me. Lacie!

Lacie turned away in tears. Slowly, stuck in the glue-like radiance of the air, Lacie kept running on.

Stay.

* * * * *

Sophie took a faltering breath, and felt something wet, some tangible flesh made all of energy deep inside her snap and squelch back into place. Whatever bodiless part of her had tried to flee, she clutched at it, tapering and squeezing all its threads. She rolled onto her back, brought two closing fists full of "threads" up to her breast, and held that lace of invisible fire, pulling it back inside of her.

Another breath. She opened her eyes.

Think of Lacie. Live for Lacie.

She knew then, she was not going to die. Not as a sacrifice for the hungering White Fire, not on the threshold of Zero Day.

~

Flesh.

Her thoughts slowly began to coalesce.

This is me, I am me.

This is my body.

I.

Having forced her to stay awake and alert long enough to free herself and to breathe, Sophie's body at last surrendered the adrenaline surge into a nothingness of exhaustion.

The world is burning now.

She could hear, somewhat. The explosions had turned to silence. The air conditioner growled, something beneath the floor went *drip, drip* and became a song, a lullaby.

A strange thought, not one of vengeance but merely one of morbid serenity, was the last thing Sophie contemplated on that day. The men who had shot her husband, who had murdered him for trying to save her life and that of Lacie, all of them would be dead by now.

All burning.

Goodbye.

A strange smile crept upon Sophie's face, one twitching end of it tilting up and then the other, where a little blood had burbled through.

And then she fell into the black mercy of unknowing. Everything, every thought and every part of her turned to liquid and cascaded down into the darkness.

Lacie.

That day, unlike six billion and seven hundred and eighty-three million other souls, Sophia Ingrid Saint-Germain lived on.

Goodbye.

Her daughter smiled. In the fading radiance, Lacie waved to her mother one last time before she ran out of sight.

Goodbye.

Staring at the crumbling ceiling, Sophie smiled back.

I will come to you, Lacie.

I promise you I will find you.

Alone, exalted, sheltered for rebirth and so fallen in preconception of the Awakening, Sophie of the Black Hawk touched unfeeling fingers to her lips, and with a gentle smile she closed her eyes.

(Thank you for purchasing and reading this novella. The survival story of Sophie St.-Germain continues in Episode II: The Cage. All six volumes of the complete FROM THE FIRE saga are available now from Wonderland Imprints. ~ KDK)